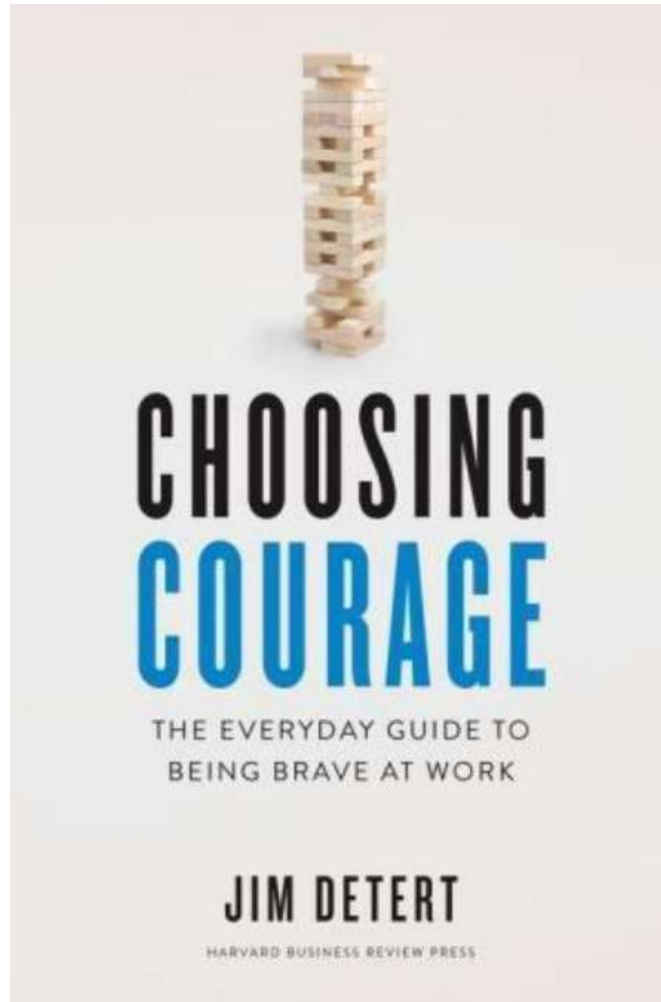


Detert focuses on professional integrity

Posted: Sunday, August 29, 2021

“Choosing Courage: The Everyday Guide to Being Brave at Work” by Jim Detert. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2021, 256 pages, \$30 (hardcover).



“As adults, we know what we’d like to do when it matters most at work: we hope we’d tell the truth, stand up for ourselves or others and say ‘no’ when going along would be wrong,” Jim Detert explains near the beginning of “Choosing Courage: The Everyday Guide to Being Brave at Work,” his new roadmap for navigating the often-treacherous landscape that increasingly characterizes the modern workplace. “For example, if you were Rebecca, who works at a New York investment firm, and realized you were making only a fraction of what your male colleagues were making despite significantly outperforming them, you’d like to think you’d confront the male founders on behalf of yourself and other women facing this systematic inequity.”

“Or that if you (like too many accountants, sales managers and safety experts) got told to ‘Make the numbers look better’ or ‘Downplay the severity of the risks,’ you’d push back and refuse to do something that’s misleading and possibly illegal or dangerous,” the author continues. “Sadly, people face similar choices every day and often don’t speak up or push back. Feeling scared, unclear how to voice

their concerns effectively and trapped, they instead carry on silently and hope for the best. They lose respect for those above them and perhaps for themselves for their complicity. Over time, they’re likely to start giving less and less of their best selves to their work and struggle to feel committed or engaged. They ‘quit before leaving.’”

So begins a foray into a subject all too familiar to many of us. I’d like to think I have a pretty good relationship with most of the students who have taken my classes at Western Kentucky University. Certainly, many of them keep me posted on the trials and tribulations they inevitably encounter in the proverbial “real world” after graduation. In fact, a lot of the stories Detert relates in this exquisite little primer resonate dramatically with my own experience as well as a significant proportion of my current and former students. As far as I am concerned, in addition to their diploma, a copy of “Choosing Courage” should be handed to everyone who walks across the stage at every commencement they participate in – from high school through graduate school.

“Choosing Courage” is extensively researched, with 17 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the 11 chapters that comprise the main narrative. Structurally, the manuscript is arranged in three major sections – after an introduction that serves to set the stage for what is about to come: “Part One: The Nature of Workplace Courage” (chapters 2-4); “Part Two: How to Be Competently

Courageous” (chapters 5-9); and “Part Three: Climbing Your Courage Ladder” (chapters 10 and 11). The literary style is both explanatory as well as prescriptive – a formula I have always found particularly effective as I feel it is always important to describe the nature of the challenges you are addressing before launching into a strategy for counteracting their detrimental effects. At its core, Detert is espousing a better way of advocating for yourself at work, which is something many employees desperately need to know how to do.

As many readers can attest, learning to control your emotions at work is one of the keys to having a successful career; i.e., one that progresses according to the plan you made when you first heard those potentially life-changing words, “You’re hired.” As such, I was pleasantly surprised and somewhat reassured when I saw that Detert devoted an entire chapter to this infinitely important yet exceedingly difficult dimension that is inherently tied to our personal efficacy. Consider the following from “Channeling Emotions,” the eighth chapter and one I enjoyed immensely.

“Though preparing ourselves emotionally for a tough situation warrants a book of its own, let me share here one idea I find highly compelling: if you want to learn to control, rather than be controlled by, your emotions, you need to recognize and own the distinction between your immediate, instinctive reaction and what you do next,” Detert asserts. “Then you need to accept that what comes next is up to you, not the person you think is causing your reaction. Your instinctive reactions – those immediate flashes of fear or anger – are pretty much hardwired and automatic based on what New York University neuroscientist Joseph Ledoux calls our brain’s ‘defense circuitry.’ If you stay on autopilot, you’ll likely fuel the initial emotional heat.”

“Unfortunately, many of us do just that, engaging in thinking patterns that throw logs on the fire, not recognizing that we (not the initial trigger) are now the cause of our pain and inability to respond optimally,” he goes on. “However, you can take steps to defuel the fire that’s been ignited in your body by working to consciously interpret what’s going on in a way that calms you down. ... The point of choosing these latter alternatives isn’t just that they’re likely to be more accurate; it’s that you’re much more likely to calm down if you can see the situation this way, and thus much more likely to continue the interaction with your boss in a way that gives you some chance of success. You’ll be less likely to say things that make it sound like you’re attacking or insulting your boss.”

The John L. Colley Professor of Business Administration at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business, Detert earned an M.A. in sociology and a Ph.D. in organizational behavior from Harvard University. Prior to joining the faculty at the University of Virginia, he taught at Cornell University’s Johnson School of Management, where he was director of their leadership initiative. A frequent contributor to Harvard Business Review, his research has been featured in the Academy of Management Journal, Administrative Science Quarterly, Academy of Management Review, Journal of Applied Psychology, Organization Science, Personnel Psychology, Research in Organizational Behavior and the Journal of Business Ethics. This is his first book.

In the final chapter, “It’s Up to You,” Detert poses two questions that get to the core of his thesis: “Are you willing to do the hard work of preparing yourself for moments of courageous action, to take steps to maximize your ability to act competently and confidently, and to do so with the best possible chances of success? And are you willing to act despite the risks that will always remain, choosing to stand for things that are more important to you and others than your personal success or popularity?”

If you answered “yes” to both questions – questions that go straight to the heart of your individual/professional integrity – then “Choosing Courage” is definitely a book you’ll want to add to your personal library. Detert shows you how it’s done. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.