

Courage

by Charles B. Wendel

If you have ever watched *Curb Your Enthusiasm* you have met Larry David, one of the creators of *Seinfeld* and the main character in this HBO show. Larry is sardonic, sarcastic, and cantankerous. He suffers fools badly and pushes back against conventions he does not agree with. In one episode a friend is introducing him to her daughter and the man she has just become engaged to. The young man is a veteran and the half dozen people in the room, one by one, dutifully thank him for his military service. Larry, not one to fit in, simply says something like, "Nice to meet you." The relatives and the young man are insulted and, if I remember correctly, Larry is asked to leave.

My own world view had been closer to Larry's than the neighbors, being a kid during Vietnam and part of the anti-war generation, but...

Months ago, my Miami condo doorman saw me struggling with some packages and rushed to help. He is a slight, thin man, and the doorman from heaven. He usually does not come out from behind his desk. I noticed a limp and asked him if he was OK. It turns out he is an ex-marine who had both legs amputated after a parachuting accident during a training run. When he knocked on his legs, they make a metallic sound. Maybe that's the harsh sound of freedom. On Memorial Day I thanked him for his service and meant it.

For a minute consider his courage versus our own lives. Of course, we all have personal crises, deaths, illnesses, and multiple other tragedies. That is one reason why the YOLO movement has been gaining steam. But let's focus on work and how many hurdles, sometimes meaningless hurdles, we create before we get things done. Many bankers operate with self-preservation as their main goal, never mind the PR about "enhancing the customer experience." They work in a culture in which it is better to analyze an issue to death and CYA rather than try a new path that could lead to both learnings and failure.

I was recently speaking with a friend who heads a group that wants to sell its revenue-producing product to banks. I started to list the issues his company would need to address in order to make a sale:

- Who else is a client? No bank wants to be first.
- How much employee time is required? Banks say they are always running flat out. Covid issues makes employee project focus difficult to achieve. Getting a bank organized to assess, approve, and implement a project likely is more problematic than ever.
- Will the revenue "move the needle"? No, it won't. Most revenue initiatives may "nudge" the revenue up and expecting more than that is unrealistic. Banks need lots of nudges to grow their revenue streams. Products may have more of a relationship and retention value versus the dollars they generate.
- Revenue is often a lower priority than issues related to compliance and fraud. In the short term that may be understandable, but ultimately that focus leads to more industry consolidation and fewer jobs.

- Who makes the decision? At most banks no one person does. Oftentimes, individuals can play a decisive role in rejecting a vendor, but the decision to move forward requires multiple signoffs, both for reasons of due diligence and, maybe, blame sharing. Too many silos continue to exist at banks. Silos are both time consuming and enervating. Most Fintechs and the best banks don't have them.
- A "They" mindset. I will never forget a meeting with a Bank president, the number two in the bank, who expressed frustration about completing some initiatives quickly, complaining about "them" slowing a process. When I suggested that he was "them," he just raised his eyebrows and went on. In his case he also had more dollars than he could even spend, so why not be assertive. Another banker, soon to retire, told me that he had become more assertive in pushing for change. Too bad that he had one foot out the door when he did. Not a profile in courage.

Banking requires thoughtful risk control, but increasingly it also demands a bias toward experimentation and action rather than slow study and inaction until inaction is no longer an option (see digital). The courage required for a banker or, for that matter, a consultant to act or commit pales in comparison to what any veteran has demonstrated.

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