

Have we called time on integrity and civil courage?

Patrick K. Magyar



Despite being essential contributors to any team's success, we often fail to appreciate civil courage and integrity enough. Whistleblowers are usually ostracised. However, new role models raise hopes for a comeback of the two values.

Protection necessary

As the Meeting Director of Weltklasse Zürich and as CEO of the 2014 European Athletics Championships, I was interviewed about leadership once. I remember demanding protective measures for people with civil courage during the conversation. I had a particular colleague in mind: Her expertise and commitment had been undisputed in our organisation. But team members regularly accused her of interfering without cause. She, however, felt that not enough attention was given to the concerns of what she called "ordinary people", meaning volunteers, visitors, or athlete.

Putting up with negative feedback

Her interventions were inconvenient. Particularly because I knew she was right most of the times. All she asked for was for us to practise the values we had defined. And she was prepared to put up with negative feedback to her speaking out.

What boss likes to have his or her integrity questioned? Integrity means that the value system you have defined matches your actions. Civil courage involves upholding this integrity, even at the detriment of your own position. It means interfering when it is necessary. Our colleague did the right thing and contributed hugely to our success in the process. "Ordinary people" had put their trust in us, and they acknowledged our adhering to our own values. I still feel ashamed when thinking about how long it took me to value that.

Are whistleblowers traitors?

Later, I learned that civil courage can be perilous. Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov, now close friends of mine, exposed the Russian doping system in 2014. They became whistleblowers and provoked the biggest scandal in

the history of sports. Thousands of athletes owe fairer competition conditions to their actions. However, the two were rewarded with threats, insults, and humiliation. They had to leave their country and live in hiding – a fate they share with many whistleblowers. Few were prepared to support them, and authorities seemed particularly hesitant. And yet, as Franca Magnani put it, «The more citizens with civil courage a country has, the fewer heroes it will once need.»

Role models

Sometimes, people displaying civil courage serve as role models. Regardless of whether you agree with Greta Thunberg or not, you have to recognise the fact, that she speaks and acts with the greatest possible integrity. She never flies, is a vegan, and she does not buy any new clothes. She has always been prepared to bear the consequences her values impose on her – and became a role model for millions of young people. They accept punishment for attending school strikes, change their diets, and reimagine travelling. This level of commitment is impressive, no matter what your position on climate change may be.

A comeback for integrity

Role models like Greta Thunberg hopefully bring about a comeback for integrity and civil courage. Integrity must become a clause in the unwritten agreement team members have with each other. We have to support and protect whistleblowers who act out of genuine concern and other people showing civil courage. Especially in trying times, integrity and civil courage promote trust – in your team and the future. And trust is and will be the most important factor for any team's triumph.