

Honoring the Work That Actually Matters

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There's a version of organizational leadership that sounds like this: Everything is important. Every initiative is a priority. Every project deserves your full attention and your best effort.

This is not leadership. It is noise and over time, people learn to stop listening.

The Courage Economy runs on a different operating principle. It holds that truth about what matters, what doesn't, and what we are actually asking of people is the foundational resource of any high-performing organization. When we squander that resource by calling everything important, we don't get an energized workforce. Instead, we get a cynical one.

Which brings me to one of the most underappreciated disciplines in a Courage Economy: honoring the important work.

What It Means to Honor Important Work

To honor important work means to treat it the way important things deserve to be treated. It is not with slogans or an all-hands where the CEO reads from a slide deck about "our commitment to excellence." It is done with the actual signals that tell every person in the organization clearly and unmistakably that this is real.

You know something is genuinely important to leadership when:

They fund it. Real resources go toward it. Headcount. Budget. Time on the calendar of people who matter. When something important competes for resources with something unimportant, the important thing consistently wins.

They talk about it and engage with it. Not once in a kickoff. They talk about it repeatedly in the ways that matter. This happens in one-on-ones, in operating reviews, and in the questions asked. Leaders communicate priority through repetition and through what they keep coming back to.

They measure it. If it's important, there's a number. There's a metric that tracks whether it's moving and that metric is reviewed regularly, not filed away in a quarterly report no one reads.

They measure performance against it. Here is where most organizations reveal the truth they won't say out loud. If something is genuinely important, then whether someone is doing it, and doing it well, affects how that person is evaluated. If it doesn't touch performance conversations, it isn't actually important. It's decorative.

They don't lie about it. This one is the hardest. A Courage Economy organization does not declare something important in order to generate enthusiasm for it. That's manipulation, not leadership. And your people know the difference, often before you do. When leaders inflate the significance of work to manufacture buy-in, they are borrowing against the trust account. And trust, once spent, is difficult to replenish.

The Tax of False Importance

Most organizations have experienced this: the initiative announced with great fanfare that quietly disappears six months later. The "top priority" that somehow never made it into anyone's goals. The transformation program that ran in parallel to the actual business without ever touching it.

Every one of these is a withdrawal from a trust account that takes years to build and minutes to drain.

When people watch leadership call something important and then fail to act like it's important, they draw a conclusion. The conclusion is not, "leadership made a mistake." The conclusion they draw is, I cannot trust what I am told here. And once that conclusion is drawn, it shapes everything thereafter. How people engage, how much discretionary effort they give, and whether they tell you the truth when something goes wrong.

This is the lie economy. It is not built from dramatic deceptions. It is built from the accumulation of small misalignments between what is said and what is done. And it is extraordinarily difficult to unwind.

What Honoring the Work Actually Looks Like

Before you declare something important, ask whether you are prepared to treat it that way.

Are you prepared to fund it? Actually, not symbolically? Are you prepared to talk about it consistently, not just at launch? Are you prepared to measure it and share what the data says, even when the data is uncomfortable? Are you prepared to tie performance accountability to it? Are you prepared to not call other things important just because it would be convenient for everyone to feel energized?

If the answer to any of these is no, you have two options. You can find the resources and the will to honor the work properly. Or you can be honest, with yourself and your team, that this is a lower-priority initiative and treat it accordingly.

What you cannot do in a Courage Economy, is call something important and then let it starve.

A Note on What Gets to Be Important

Not everything can be important. This is not a failure of ambition. It is the nature of organizations operating in the real world, with finite attention and finite resources.

The leaders who build the highest-trust organizations are often the ones who are most willing to say: this is not our priority right now. They earn credibility by being precise. When they do declare something important, people believe them because they have watched this leader let other things be unimportant without apology.

That precision is a form of courage. It requires resisting the temptation to generate excitement by overstating stakes, to motivate people by manufacturing urgency, or to hold the team's attention by calling everything a priority.

The work that actually matters deserves better than that.

Honor Important Work.