The Struggle Is the Point

Why do some groups accomplish extraordinary things together while most never do? I found my answer in the Adirondacks at 17. It took me thirty years to understand it.

Four weeks in the Adirondacks

When I was 17, my parents sent me on an Outward Bound wilderness survival course. I was a typical teenager struggling to get it together in high school, and I think they wanted me away from friends they considered a bad influence.

I did not want to go. I had too many parties to attend and too many fun things to do with my “questionable” friends. But my parents were clear. I would spend four weeks in the Adirondack Mountains with twelve other teens and two instructors, whether I liked it or not.

We arrived at the parking lot with mountain peaks in the background. It was hot. People were sorting a huge pile of backpacks, tents, and food. I sized up my fellow travelers. There was a girl who couldn’t have been more than five feet tall, a tall, kind-faced guy in a stretched-out tank top, and a guy in sports gear who looked like a linebacker ready to attack the mountains.

Would they be cool? Would they be jerks? I had never done anything like this before. I was nervous.

Then our instructors gathered us for a pep talk. We would have fun, they said. We would learn a lot. And we would suffer.

Huh? Nobody had mentioned suffering.

At first, everyone was out of sorts. One guy bragged that he was an expert camper. A girl stayed quiet and looked down whenever anyone spoke to her. Another guy talked nonstop, as if he could talk his nerves away. I didn’t say much.

Soon we learned what the instructors meant. We carried 50-pound packs up steep mountains in 90-degree heat. I carried a 100-pound canoe by myself for miles while mosquitoes swarmed me. We ate a diet of nuts and twigs, washed down with stream water purified with iodine tablets.

It was miserable. I wanted nothing more than to go home.

But in the middle of that suffering, something began to happen. In the struggle to keep going when every part of our bodies wanted to shut down, we were revealed for exactly who we were.

The braggart turned out to be a decent guy. He boasted to hide his insecurities, but he was strong, and he kept us going when we all wanted to quit.

When I collapsed under the weight of my pack in the oppressive heat, the small, shy girl pulled the tent out of my pack and put it in her own. Then she literally pulled me up off the ground and told me to “move my ass.”

The struggle burned away all pretense, all fakery, everything we used to hide our weaknesses and fears. We could see right through each other. And we loved each other for it.

When the program ended, we walked back into that same parking lot proud and strong, easily hefting our 50-pound packs. We laughed like friends who had known each other for a lifetime. At the beginning, I had wanted only to escape. At the end, I wanted nothing more than to stay.

The struggle to survive had made us a real community. People with different backgrounds and experiences who deeply cared about one another and would not let each other fail. I admit that I cried when we parted.

Those four weeks were among the most beautiful and satisfying of my life. I have spent thirty years trying to understand why.

Organizations can be designed this way

Why do some groups of people accomplish extraordinary things together while most do not? That question has haunted my career in organizational development and executive coaching.

Here is what I have come to believe: the struggle is the point. Struggle creates trust. Struggle creates community. Struggle burns away the lies and pretense that keep people from doing extraordinary things.

Most organizations are built to avoid struggle. They optimize for comfort, harmony, and predictability. But comfort runs on small lies: “This is really important.” “We value your input.” “Bring your whole self to work.” Those lies feel harmless, even kind. Over time, they compound into cynicism, disengagement, and teams that perform for each other instead of working together.

I have also come to believe that organizations can be designed like my experience in the mountains. We can deliberately shape how an organization is built and how it works so that the struggle to accomplish important work together creates a virtuous cycle. The organization flourishes, and so do the people in it.

When people do genuinely hard and important work together, something changes. They stop performing and hiding, because they are quickly revealed for who they are. Their maneuvering is open for everyone to see. After what they have been through together, they can’t lie to each other anymore.

I call this the Courage Economy.

A question for leaders

You can’t create this with slogans or a commitment to honesty. Those never work. You create it by giving people work that truly matters and conditions where telling the truth costs less than lying.

So here is my question for you: when was the last time your team struggled together on something that truly mattered? And what did that struggle reveal about who they really are?

This article is adapted from the preface of my book, *The Courage Economy: Why Companies Lie and How to Change Yours*, available on Amazon. Tools and resources are at thecourageeconomy.net.