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The Struggle of Courageous Leadership

A guest article from Brett Culp



Emery Benson was eleven years old when his family was on a hiking trip in the Smoky Mountains. Emery wandered downstream to explore. Back at the top, seven-year-old Devin Leslie was standing on a boulder. Without warning, Devin’s mom heard a splash. Her son had fallen into the raging current.

It was a desperate moment. Devin was in serious danger, and his mom was powerless to do anything about it. All she could do was scream, “HELP!”

Emery was startled by her cry. He looked at the river and spotted Devin rushing toward him. In seconds, Devin would move past him and out of reach, and there was no one to assist in the river below.

It was very dangerous. If he hesitated, Devin would be left alone in a life-threatening situation, completely out of control in the water. But if he jumped in, he was risking his own life and there would be no one to help.

What would you do? Standing at the side of a violent river, hearing the cry for help, understanding the risk for yourself, and having no time to think. A split-second decision to take a risk—or to play it safe—could have cost either of the boys their lives.

Emery decided to take a leap. Without a moment of hesitation, he jumped into the water, swimming hard. When Devin came toward him, Emery held him with one arm and used his other arm to paddle to the

closest boulder.

I included his brave story in my newest documentary film [Look to the Sky](#). I asked Emery why he decided to jump into the river. He told me that he had just earned his swimming badge in Cub Scouts so he felt he could do it. I have no idea if having such a badge qualifies an eleven-year-old to jump into a raging river. I doubt it. But I'm touched by his belief that he could.

When we truly believe that our actions can make an impact, we are empowered to do bold, courageous things. That sense of possibility makes us brave. It inspires us to dive into new relationships, explore different opportunities, launch creative projects, and build innovative ventures.

As a leader, an essential (and often unspoken) part of your job is continuing to “hold space” for the positive opportunities ahead, even when the circumstances are frightening. This hopeful perspective gives you the courage to jump in and stay with the struggle. It motivates you to take action when the safer path is to stand on the riverbank and do nothing.

Right now, there are countless reasons to hesitate. You and your team are probably struggling with challenges you couldn't have imagined. Strategies that were once filled with so much certainty and confidence have been de-constructed. The path forward can seem unclear.

Through these struggles, you might be tempted to lose heart or just wait things out. But this is a moment to engage and innovate. To imagine the potential that is invisible to others. To share hope when it seems like everything is broken. To construct bold new paths forward.

This kind of leadership is what we need every day to keep fighting and to believe our work in the world matters. It's the courage we need to grow our teams, our communities, and ourselves.

Brett Culp is an acclaimed documentary filmmaker whose work has inspired audiences around the world. He uncovers and captures powerful human experiences through his heartwarming movies. He has been featured in USA Today, Entertainment Tonight, WIRED, The Hollywood Reporter, Netflix, and many more - and he will be the closing keynote speaker during [mhca's Memphis Conference - Home Edition](#).



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