



# 10 Principles for a Happy Life and Career

## Principle 5: Courage

By Michael A. Crawford, CPA

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*Editor's Note: Mike Crawford has, by even his own accounts, had a successful and happy career as a CPA in Oklahoma. He says there are 10 basic principles that have guided him through a joyful life and a fulfilling career. In this and future issues of CPAFOCUS, Crawford shares that idea and those principles.*

**T**he wishbone will never replace the backbone." - Will Henry

While most people first think of physical courage when the topic of courage comes up, there's also moral courage. Moral courage can be defined as the strength to stand up for core values like honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness and compassion, and take action in the face of undesirable consequences. It seems inherently unfair that there should ever be adverse consequences for doing the right thing. However, taking the moral high ground can be tough, especially if you have to stand alone and face potential punishment, ridicule or even unemployment.

As a society, we seem to recognize and openly admire and applaud acts of physical bravery, such as those demonstrated every day by military and emergency personnel risking their lives for the benefit of others—and rightly so. We would never dream of subjecting them to adverse consequences. So, why should anyone taking a difficult, but morally right, action ever face potentially negative corollaries?

Mark Twain once said, "It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world, and moral courage so rare." However, it isn't curious at all when one understands the unpleasant possibilities surrounding the exercise of moral courage.

In the early years of my accounting business, I was faced with an ethical dilemma that tested my moral courage under pressure. While conducting

an audit of the financial statements of one of our new clients, our staff discovered some unusual elements in the CEO's employment contract, resulting in questionable payments. In summary, through what we felt was abuse of employment contract wording and potential misleading communications to the governing board, the CEO had been able to turn an annual \$80,000 salary into payroll payments in excess of \$250,000 for that year. When we questioned the CEO about the contract wording and payments, we were sternly told it was none of our business and was between him and the governing board. When we completed the audit and asked to present our results to the governing board, we were denied that opportunity by the CEO and told that he would present the results. While this client and the potential revenue to our firm was significant, it was not near as important as maintaining our integrity. So we exercised moral courage by resigning and submitting our audit results to the appropriate state regulatory authority. Eventually, the CEO's questionable actions were made public and charges were filed. The former CEO was found guilty of embezzlement and sentenced to prison. We lost this client and the revenue for a number of years, but we felt then—and we still feel—that we did the right thing in resigning and alerting those with authority to intervene. Interesting enough, about 10 years after our resignation, the entity, under new management, asked us to come back and work with them again. Today, they remain a valuable and loyal client, thankful for our moral courage.

Don't ever be afraid of the consequences. Do the right thing. ☺