

Endurance Builds Ethical Muscles
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Poke a camera in my face and I'll forget important facts - like my own name. Panic takes over. My heart beats quicker, my throat tightens and brain cells freeze. Granted, it's not a rational fear. Instead, it's more about the *potential* threat of embarrassment as I vividly imagine my dumbest moment being played over and over again on YouTube.

When I jokingly mentioned my paranoia in passing to a psychologist friend, he suggested that I practice in front of a microphone till my anxiety disappears. In other words, endure the frightful sensation till it is dulled by repetition. Admittedly, I didn't swell with enthusiasm at the notion.

But, he's right. And, I'm beginning to realize that his technique could be a valuable tool for building the ethical muscles necessary to survive moral dilemmas in the workplace. According to the Character First Institute, endurance is withstanding stress in order to meet a goal. Like our Olympic athletes who build up their stamina through dedicated practice, our confidence and ability to do the right thing will develop if we persist past our trepidations.

Many of us know the story of courageous Cynthia Cooper, the small-town Mississippi woman who exposed the scandal that brought down Worldcom. Immediately after the story broke, she felt the brutal vulnerability of exposure that comes from being catapulted into a national media spotlight. It was a rough change for the quiet internal auditor turned whistleblower, but she grew from the experience. Today, she is known for her homespun integrity and earns a nice living on the national speaker circuit. Her compelling message is about withstanding fear to do the right thing.

But, do you recall the other Worldcom employees who, unlike Ms. Cooper, were afraid to press forward with their concerns about the illicit activities? Job security was apparently more important than facing an awkward confrontation with their superiors. In the end, Worldcom ultimately succumbed to the fraud and these employees faced prison sentences for their complicity.

As human beings, the former Worldcom employees' plight will resonate with many of us. Understandably, there is pain involved in the conflicting demands of supporting one's family versus living by one's principles. Endurance sometimes requires us to face quandaries like that, but more often than not, it involves small acts of courage. For some, it might be the admission of a mistake and offering of an apology to a coworker. It could be a matter of dealing with someone else's boorish reaction to the truth. Routinely, endurance may involve unselfishly keeping our daily commitments to others, even when personal inconveniences may tempt us to renege.

Endurance requires discipline and a drive to succeed. So, I'll take my friend's advice and start practicing with that microphone. The fear is not an easy hurdle, but it can be overcome. And, so can life's ethical dilemmas when we've developed the personal fortitude to face these challenges.