

Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

A STORY ABOUT COURAGE



The smell of metal dust and warm oil hangs in the air as I walk through the warehouse door at 6:05 a.m. Outside it's still dark, that thick December darkness that isn't really night, but more like a heavy blanket over morning. Inside, bright neon lights, the hum of machinery, the clacking of footsteps on the concrete floor. Year-end rush. The very word has been making my stomach churn for days.

"Morning, Florian," Sven calls to me from the early shift. His tone is the same as always, but his eyes are questioning. It's the kind of look I've seen far too often in recent weeks: Do something. Please.

I just nod and move on to our whiteboard. Scrap rate. Higher than yesterday again. I stand there for a moment, staring at the numbers as if I could force them down with sheer concentration. Behind me, the shift handover is getting underway. The air changes as the late shift leaves and the early shift arrives—as if the whole team is taking a deep breath and starting afresh.

"Florian?" Jule is standing next to me. She's holding the clipboard folder with the handover list. "Yesterday's block... Three more pieces weren't the right size. They came from Station 4." Station 4. Tom. "I'll check right away," I say, sounding as matter-of-fact as if I weren't already running around inside. Jule hesitates. "You know... we're all at our limit right now. If this keeps up, we'll be at the back of the pack next week." "I know." I smile briefly, but it's more of a grimace. "Thanks for letting me know."

She leaves, and I stay put, even though five things are already racing through my mind at once: the numbers, the production manager, the deadlines, the team's morale. And Tom. Tom's been with us for eight years. He used to be the one I could rely on completely.

The one who was the first one in the hall whenever there was a problem.
The one who not only found the errors, but also had a solution ready to hand.

When I took over team leadership two years ago, I thought: If I have Tom behind me, it will work. And it did. For a long time.

For the past six weeks, he's been like a different person. He's always late. His handovers are rushed. He makes mistakes you wouldn't normally make if you knew what you were doing. At first, I tried to rationalize it: end-of-year stress, personal issues, a run of bad luck. I even opened the door for him two or three times.

"Everything okay with you?" "It's fine, Florian." "If anything comes up, let me know." "Yes."

And that's how it stayed. And I stayed. Hoping that it would get better if I just had enough patience. I go to station 4. Tom is standing there, his back slightly bent, focused on his workpiece. He seems tired. Not tired from "poor sleep," but as if someone had drained his energy reserves for weeks.

"Tomorrow," I say. "Tomorrow." His gaze flickers briefly up and down again.

I see the screw that isn't quite tight. I see the handle that's two millimeters too far out. I also see the way he briefly presses his lips together, as if he himself had realized that something was wrong – and can no longer grasp it.

"Tom, do you have five minutes later?" I ask. He hesitates, ever so slightly. "Later?" "After my shift. Break room." His face remains neutral, but something rises in his shoulders. Defensiveness? Fear? I can't read it. "Okay," he says.

I continue walking. And my stomach tightens, as if I had just pushed something very heavy somewhere I would have to pick it up later.

At 9:30 a.m., the production manager, Mr. Boder, enters the hall. He has this way of entering a room without being loud, and yet it becomes quieter when he's there. "Florian, do you have a moment?" He stops in front of the whiteboard and taps the reject count with his index finger. "We're running into trouble. This is the third week over target. What's going on?"

I feel myself automatically take a breath to explain. As always. "We're understaffed, sick leave is high, I have two new people who aren't fully integrated yet, and on ward 4..." He raises his hand. "Florian. I know the background. I'm concerned about the impact. What are you doing?" "I..." My heart races. "I'm taking care of it. Today."

He nods, looks at me for a moment as if checking whether I take myself seriously. "Good. I need a plan by tomorrow morning for how you'll bring the ratings back down. And please, no heroics, okay? You don't have to shoulder this alone." He leaves. The phrase "heroics" lingers in my mind like a small thorn. As if he knows that's exactly my reflex.

12:45 PM. End of shift. I worked all morning, firing people, supporting them, correcting them, motivating them, quickly organizing a replacement, and in between, pretending that the conversation with Tom wasn't weighing on me like a stone. Now the hall is emptier, the machines quieter. The smell lingers.

The break room is quiet, only the coffee machine hums softly. I put down two cups. One with coffee, one with tea – because I don't know what he'll want today. I hear footsteps, then the door opens. Tom comes in and pauses briefly, as if surprised that someone is actually waiting for him. "Sit down." I gesture to the chair opposite. He sits down, slowly. He doesn't look at me.

I feel myself wanting to back away for a moment. That old pattern: Not too harsh. Not too direct. Start cautiously. Maybe just hint at it. But I hear Boder in my head: What are you doing? And I see Jule looking at me. And I realize: If I go back into my comfort zone now, I'll only make it worse.

For him.

For the team.

For me.

I place my hands on the table. "Tom, I want to talk to you about the last few weeks." He almost imperceptibly twitches his lips. "Yes." "The rejection rate at Station 4 has increased significantly. We had several parts outside the tolerance range. And you've been frequently late late lately, seeming distracted. That's not like what I know of you." I pause briefly. "And I'm worried."

He exhales audibly, looks past me. "I'm doing my best." "I can see that." I remain calm, even though my heart is pounding. "And yet, at the same time, it's just not quite enough. Not for the quality—and not for you, I think."

Now he looks up. His gaze is tired, yet suddenly very alert. "Tom, I've asked you several times if something's wrong. You said it's fine." I speak slowly, clearly. "I need more than just 'it's fine' right now. I need to know what's going on so we can find a solution. And if you don't tell me anything, I'll have to act anyway—because the impact on the team and on production will be too great."

He holds my gaze. And then something happens that I hadn't expected. He swallows. His lower lip trembles. "It... things are really messed up at home right now," he says so quietly that I have to lean forward to hear him. I say nothing. I give him space. "My mother has been in need of care for two months. I go there every evening, do everything you're supposed to do. And at night..." He trails off, as if he's suddenly run out of breath. "I hardly sleep. I thought I could manage." "And you don't want to seem weak," I say, more quietly than I intended. He nods, angry at himself. "Yes. And then the pressure builds up here and... at some point, I just don't know which way is up anymore."

Something shifts in my gut. Not because it's "better," but because it's finally true. I breathe in. "Thank you for telling me that." He laughs briefly, bitterly. "And now?"

This is the point where courage consists not only of addressing an issue, but also of not slipping into rescue mode. Courage here means: remaining clear-headed and still being human.

"Now we're doing two things in parallel." I point to the production figures in my folder. "First: We need consistent quality at your station again. To achieve this, starting tomorrow, we'll have two people working on station 4 for two weeks. Sven will join you, and you'll perform the critical steps together. Not as a check, but as a safeguard. The responsibility remains with you – but you won't be alone."

Tom opens his mouth, but I raise my hand. "Secondly, we'll look into how you can better manage the care at home. I want you to speak with HR today. We'll check whether we can temporarily adjust your shifts or if a partial leave of absence is possible. And if you'd like, I can connect you with a coach who has worked with us before. She's good at sorting through these kinds of situations."

He stares at me as if I've just spoken a language he knows but hasn't heard in a long time. "You... you'd really do that?" "Yes." "But then someone would be missing here."

"Tom, we're losing you anyway. Only worse." I smile small. "And we're losing quality if we continue like this. It's not an either-or situation. It's a both-and situation that we're organizing now." He rubs his eyes. "I didn't want everyone to think I couldn't go on."

"Everyone can see that you're fighting." My voice is calm. "The only question is whether you have to fight alone."

He nods slowly. "Okay."

We talk for another twenty minutes: who, when, how, which station, what support, how we communicate it to the team. As he leaves, he pauses briefly by the door.

"Florian?" "Yes?" "Thank you. I... I really didn't dare."

I look at him. "Me neither. But that's exactly why we're doing this now."

When I return to the hall later, my body feels heavy and lighter at the same time. Outside the windows, it's still dark. Inside, everything is lit up the same as before. But something has shifted.

Courage is not loud.

Courage is not about that grand performance where everyone applauds.

Courage is sometimes a break room, a table, two cups, and the moment you no longer look away.

And if I'm honest: courage also means being able to endure myself in the process.

Takeaway inspiration

Courage

Courage in leadership means speaking out or doing what is necessary despite uncertainty or inner resistance – even if it is unpleasant or triggers opposition. It is demonstrated less in grand gestures and more in clear steps that combine truth and responsibility.

If you find yourself putting off a conversation, set a specific time for it today—and go into it with a clear statement that you usually keep to yourself. Courage doesn't begin with the perfect solution, but with the first honest naming of the issue.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT COURAGE FOR YOU

1. Where exactly am I currently avoiding a conversation or a decision – with whom, since when, and what is this avoidance costing me specifically?
2. What fear or belief is holding me back (e.g., "I mustn't disappoint anyone," "I have to know everything first," "Then I won't be liked anymore")?
3. What is a courageous but realistic step I can take in the next 48 hours to make my courage visible?



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