

Leadership, Courage, and Ethical Behavior: An Executive Approach

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Abstract:

Organizations constitute morally complex environments, requiring organization members to possess levels of moral courage sufficient to promote their ethical action while refraining from unethical actions when faced with temptations or pressures. Courageous leadership requires a true understanding of organizational structure and pressures. In terms of methodology, this study will examine the moderating and mediating variables of courage, leadership, and ethics on leadership in contemporary organizations. This study will be a qualitative study utilizing the 2007 Woodard and Pury Courage Scale, a 23-item survey measuring two dimensions, courage as the ability to act and the fear factor involved with the action. The sample will consist of graduate students working in global corporations located in the South and Central Florida region of the USA. The relevance of the professions of the participants studied will be considered. The importance of this study is that preconceived notions of whether a leader is perceived as ethical and trustworthy may be as important as the outcomes that can be observed. This study seeks to examine the moderating and mediating variables of courage, leadership, and ethics in contemporary organizations. Recognizing the courageous and ethical leadership traits that inspire trust may assist organizations in searching for new leadership. Only a few research studies have tried to empirically derive types or categorizations of courage, but scholars have shown renewed interest in the construct of courage.

Keywords: Global leadership, courage, ethics, fear, followership, executive leadership



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INTRODUCTION

This study will focus on courage in leadership as a product of the willingness to take action and the fear experienced while taking the action. Few research studies have tried to empirically derive types or categorizations of courage and to date, little is known about the impact of social courage on work and organizational outcomes (Magnano, et al. 2022, p. 1). This study seeks to examine the moderating and mediating variables of courage, leadership, and ethics in contemporary organizations. Recognizing the courageous and ethical

leadership traits that inspire trust may assist organization searching for new leadership.

Business ethics is part of applied ethics that examines ethical principles and problems that can arise in a business environment. However, ethical standards and the extent to which organizations engage in ethical behavior depend on several factors including the type of corporate governance structure under which the corporation operates.

In the 21st century, there are many excellent examples of ethical and motivational leadership in organizations. Unfortunately,

there are just as many if not more examples of unethical and unscrupulous leadership. Leaders continually communicate their personal values and ethics verbally and in writing, but they must demonstrate and apply these attributes to be believable. Perceptions of leaders and personal stories by and about the leaders often form the beliefs of followers.

This research project is important because we can attempt to identify people who are willing to act despite a threat to a worthy outcome. Thus, this research may augment the selection procedures or identify members of an organization that might be well-suited for certain leadership assignments or tasks.

Leaders and organizations with questionable ethics are all too common today. VanSandt and Neck (2003) studied ethical discrepancies between employee and organizational standards. They found that one-fourth of firms did not have a code of ethics, and most written codes of ethics are often written to protect the organization from employees' illegal and unethical behaviors. These codes of ethics focused on employee conflict of interest, embezzlement, and honesty. They were less concerned with social responsibility, safety, or environmental issues. Chekwa, et al. (2014) believe that "ethical practices within businesses are an essential part of a company's survival and that the leadership team should bear responsibility for ethical adherence" (p. 59). Dion (2012) assumes that ethical behavior for an organization begins with and is circulated by the top leadership. If the leadership exhibits egotistic unethical reasoning and the organization is primarily concerned with defending itself, it may be very difficult for employees to be accountable for decisions with little ethical or moral input from

leaders. VandSandt & Neck (2003) find that leaders may behave unethically if they are "shielded" by the corporation and are pressured to behave in an unethical manner.

Leadership entails challenging the status quo, often at significant personal and professional risk. A critical element of developing leaders is courage. Courage springs from a sense of responsibility; the belief that leadership should occur at all levels when it is needed, not when it is granted; and a firm commitment to a well-defined set of core values. It becomes especially relevant when individuals have the ability to generate change, is aware of the structural constraints to change, and recognize the pressures exerted by those constraints. Our research will attempt to expand the construct to include differing culture and age groupings and may enhance an organization's ability to better select and/or improve the skills of an effective leader.

There is a link between moral courage and fear; how leaders are perceived as morally courageous when they demonstrate fearless courage or stand up for what is right for the organization, regardless of personal vulnerability. Corporate downsizing, takeovers, reductions, terminations, economic recessions, and plant or location closings, create a source of constant fear for employees. Fear is constantly interwoven into the leadership and organizational culture. How leaders handle these fears largely determines their success or failure as a leader.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic Leadership is a multidimensional construct comprised of four dimensions: internalized moral perspective, self-awareness, relational transparency, and balance processing (Walumbwa, et al., 2008;

Holmquist, 2018). Internalized moral perspective refers to higher levels of moral development and leader behaviors that are guided by internal moral standards and values as opposed to being driven by external pressure from peers, higher-level leaders, or other social forces. Authentic leaders are deeply concerned with ethics and are directly linked to trust and transparency (Dion, 2012). When confronted with difficult ethical challenges, leaders with higher levels of moral perspective are expected to think more broadly and deeply about ethical issues (Werhane, 1999). Authentic leaders are also expected to behave in a more ethical manner as they tend to act in line with their internal values structures (Hannah, Lester, & Vogelsang, 2005). This occurs because the advanced moral constitution promotes concordant moral behavior. As a result, followers tend to attribute a leader's displays of consistent, values-based behaviors as being more 'authentic'. Authentic leaders serve as role models who promote followers' moral courage (Hannah, Walumbwa & Fry, 2011). Many may not be fortunate to have such organizational leaders, however, employees may refer to and benefit from other sources of guidance, including ethical role models from earlier in their careers or from their childhood (Brown & Trevino, 2014). Onyalla (2018, p. 10) argued that "leadership scholars have presented authentic leadership as an ideal to be sought by any leader, a factor that makes this leadership approach suitable for every form of leadership".

Moral Courage

"Moral courage is the behavioral expression of authenticity in the face of the discomfort of dissension, disapproval, or rejection" (Lopez et al., 2010, p. 23). It involves facing other persons while upholding some morally motivated cause and enduring resistance

or/retaliation that may occur in response to one's action and requires the willingness to speak up or take action...for oneself as well as for others. Moral courage compels or allows an individual to do what he or she believes is right, despite fear of social or economic consequences (Lopez et al., 2010). Thus, Solomon (1992) refers to it as "integrity under fire" (p. 264). Elsewhere he explains the difference between moral and physical courage: "moral courage [is] the courage to make the difficult decision to do the right thing even in the face of serious threats or dangers. In business, the dangers are rarely to one's life...but rather to one's career or one's financial well-being" (Solomon, 1999, p. 83). Employees in civilian organizations ordinarily incur no threats to their physical well-being for acting in accordance with their principles. However, they do confront contextual pressures that discourage the expression of ethical concerns and present impediments to the right action. As such, they often need moral courage in order to behave ethically (Hannah, et al. 2011a).

A course in business ethics offers students a forum in which to reflect on their own moral values and principles. Exposure to role models can help these students to consider how they want to conduct themselves ethically in the workplace. Indeed, empirical research suggests that exemplars may be most likely to motivate individuals who are ready to improve their behavior (Lockwood, et al., 2002, 2004). Morally courageous exemplars may thus be particularly useful for individuals who have experienced the emotional anguish of moral distress, after violating their moral principles because of organizational constraints. We would argue that many, if not most students have experienced this anguish by the time, they are pursuing a graduate degree in business. Business ethics coursework typically aims to

enhance student's ability to discern moral issues and evaluate alternatives to make moral decisions.

Hart (1992) focuses on moral exemplars in contemporary organizations. Moral confrontations, Hart (1992) explains, including whistleblowing and refusing to comply with a superior's unethical request. Similarly, the two organization subtypes of heroes in Zimbardo's (2007) taxonomy are "whistleblowers" and "bureaucracy heroes". In short, according to Hart (1992), a response to a moral crisis always requires physical courage (and may require moral courage, too, if the actor risks social status as well as physical safety); a moral confrontation demands moral courage alone (although there are instances in which whistleblowers and others who resist organizational pressures face physical threats).

According to Sosik, et al. (2018), character strength plays an important role in leader performance and success. Jablin (2006) asserts that courage is displayed by both leaders and followers generally by "speaking out," upward (follower-leader communication), and downward (leader-follower communication). When employees or leaders take an unpopular position because they believe it is in the best interest of the organization, they were perceived to be courageous. Schneider (2017) proposes that courage is displayed not only when the leader acts on their beliefs making rational decisions for the better of the organization, but also when they are willing to admit their own errors.

Moral Courage and Fear

Jablin (2006) portrays moral courage as the ability to control fear in a situation that would normally illicit fear. Harbour (2014) theorizes that courage is characterized by an

emotional intensity that is required to make decisions, act, to change things. Moral courage often is displayed by standing up for what one feels is right, at a time when it is ambiguous and uncertain. When exhibiting moral courage, emotions can emerge such as fear, fright, discomfort, anger, and frustration. Harbour (2014) found that "courage to be" differed from "courage to act," in the same context, however, both exhibit a moral element. Increased levels of difficulty in leadership sometimes result in increased personal vulnerability; however, this vulnerability can be countered when the leader utilizes moral arguments and moral courage. Sosik, et al. (2018) researched the effect of moral courage and empathy on leader performance. Honesty, humility, empathy, and moral courage did not directly relate to ethical leadership, however, combined with high self-control, these attributes resulted in enhanced ethical leadership performance. Leaders with high self-control were able to overcome stressful times that would normally deflate one's ego. Leaders with high self-control were also able to control fear, thereby enhancing their psychological wellbeing.

Fear is a reality in the workplace, fear of layoffs, fear of takeovers and mergers, fear of closings, and fear of the boss. According to Maccoby (2004). It can be more challenging for leaders to create cultures of trust in fearful or chaotic times. During times of fear and distrust, employees tend to do what they perceive to be safe and familiar. There are some occasions when fear will motivate people, but typically only for a short period of time. Management-by-fear is a connotation often associated with hierarchical organizations, authoritative leadership, and control. Pynnonen (2018) identifies three types of management-by-fear "(1) the fear is produced by the insecurity,

change, and unpredictability in the working society, (2) the leader-manager uses fear without intention or acknowledging it, and (3) leadership is intentionally built on fear and intimidation” (p. 167). Abusive management behavior results in fear, which some leaders use as a means to control behavior. Pynnonen (2019) finds that threats (whether direct or perceived) and power inequalities form the basis for management-by-fear and are typically associated with unethical leadership.

Maccoby (2004) proposes that fear is generally overcome by creating positive relationships. Liyanagamage, Fernando, and Gibbons (2022) believe that leaders who use fear to control and motivate lose their good followers. When employees believe there is transparency in the organization and they believe they are being treated fairly and honestly, they tend to be more productive and focus on their work. Employees can be more productive if they know what to expect. When faced with downsizing or job elimination, Pynnonen (2018) suggests that an ethical way to carry out the terminations with less fear would be to warn the employees in advance, allow open communications with the leadership, and make available services for the employees affected.

Moral courage is often linked to fear in the perspective that a person with great courage does not show fear, however, Woodward (2004) finds that courage is a continuum perceived by others. Woodward (2004) researched threat types and willingness to act and found that there are at least four complex types of courage (1) work/employment, (2) patriotic, religious, or belief-based physical, (3) social-moral courage, and (4) independent courage or family-based courage. Although most participants in Woodward’s study (2004)

fell into one of these four categories, it was unclear whether there was a difference between fearful courage and fearless courage.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Deontology is an ethical principle that clearly says actions are bad or good according to a set of rules (Sandberg, 2013). The principle of utilitarianism takes a different approach and says "an action is right if and only if it produces the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people" (Mosdell, 2011, p. 118). Ethically, this research highlights the contrast between the principle of deontology and the principle of utilitarianism. From Potocan and Mulej's (2009) stance, ethics is an integral sentimental part of human characteristics and the subjective portion of the starting points of any human behavior process encompassing business. Two types of ethics, ethics of care and ethics of justice, tend to contrast each other. Whereas Strike (2003) discerns in ethics of justice the dualistic tension between benefit maximization and esteem for individual rights, Begley (2006) views ethics of justice as a foundation for deciding on the actual deeds that will augment benefits for all while respecting individual rights. Ethics of justice revolves around such notions as rationality, rights, and justice, while ethics of care is concerned with consideration, sentiments, and responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

Research questions that will guide this study are: Is there an advantage to being able to identify people who are willing to act despite a threat for a worthy outcome? Can we augment selection procedures or identify members of an organization that might be well suited to certain assignments or tasks where courage may be a factor?

Woodward (2004) developed the original courage scale which measured courage as the product of the willingness to take action and the fear experienced while taking the action (Woodard and Pury, 2007). A revised version of the scale will be used in this study. Woodard and Pury (2007) created a four-factor structure and based their research on work/employment, patriotic/religion-based belief system, specific social-moral, and independent courage or family-based. Courage coupled with fear will be measured using the 2007 Woodard and Pury Courage Scale (i.e., WPCS-23). This is a 23-item scale measuring two dimensions---courage as the ability to act and the fear factor involved with the action. The relevance of the professions of the participants studied will also be considered in the results.

The methodology utilized will be a quantitative questionnaire, found in Appendix 1. The sample will consist of graduate students working in global corporations located in the South and Central Florida region of the country. The sample size proposed is 50.

CONCLUSIONS

The rationale for this research is evidence of the change in the workplace post-COVID-19. Some executives that we spoke with felt that everything has changed since COVID-19, and, in fact, they precedent all recent changes COVID-19 related change.

Authentic leadership and moral courage resonate well with courage and fear. Authentic leaders are self-aware of their fear and then possess the moral courage to face it. However, there is a factor of courage that consistently reappears in the boardroom and that is fear of change and fear of the unknown. Thus, moral courage and fear have roots in many forms of leadership and executives have been challenged with this

for over two years. “Perhaps the best way to think of courage is to treat it as a muscle. Some people are born with better muscles than others, but everyone can improve their muscles through training and practice, (Kets de Vries, 2020, p.3).

We propose a theoretical framework of ethics because we feel that there is a gap between leadership development and attempting to teach people how to be both ethical and honest. We build upon Woodbury’s research by offering several questions such as whether is there an advantage to being able to identify people who are willing to act despite a threat for a worthy outcome. Thus, we feel so strongly about the ability to be courageous and yet understand the fear factor that may be involved in decision-making, extrapolating business ventures, condensing, laying off, and many more topics that can naturally be applied to the subject of courage and fear. As our scholarly colleagues and practicing managers and executives read this article, read the questions in the survey attached and assess your courage first and fear second. Therefore, together we can build a courageous organization that does not underestimate the fear factor but embraces it. This, we feel is the cornerstone of profitability coupled with honest and ethical behavior.

Contributions

The value of identifying courage is apparent and has clear application to many managerial areas. Our research will attempt to foster a better understanding of courageous leadership and may enhance an organization’s ability to better select and/or improve the skills of an effective leader. The link between courageous leadership and fear needs to be further explored. Our global culture is rife with layoffs, recession, declining markets, and increased global

competition, which requires that leaders must be able to manage their own fear as well as the fear of their employees. Courageous leadership requires a sophisticated understanding of structural and systematic pressures, as well as the skill to navigate them to create an alternative path that others can follow (Canales & Dawson, 2011, p. 7).

With a deep respect for the authors of the following instrument, we feel that this research can generate a true-and –purposeful stream of empirical studies. We plan to use this paper as an impetus to motivate graduate students and conference participants as we take this article and publish it in a prominent journal. The two-factor leadership perspective of courage coupled with the fear factor is worthy of a compelling and resourceful research stream which encompasses not only leadership but also moral and ethical aspects that relate to both organizations and public sector institutions.

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APPENDIX 1

PROPOSED COURAGE QUESTIONNAIRE

Reference noted and all rights reserved for the following authors:

Woodard, C. R., and Pury, C. L. S. (2007). "The construct of courage categorization and measurement". *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 59(2), 135-147.

Listed below are some situations for you to consider. Once you have read an item, please circle a number to indicate your level of agreement with that item (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation (1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear)

1) I would accept an important project at my place of employment even though it would bring intense public criticism and publicity.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

2) It is looked like someone would get badly hurt; I would intervene directly in a dangerous domestic dispute.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

3) I could approach someone whose family members had just been killed, knowing they were feeling overwhelming grief.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

4) I would risk rejection by important others for a chance at achieving my life goals.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

5) If called upon during times of national emergency, I would give my life for my country.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

6) I am able to participate in intense conflict in a work environment for the right cause.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

7) I would talk to my supervisor about a raise if I really needed one.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

8) I would go to the dentist and have painful surgery if it meant saving a tooth.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

9) I would risk my life if it meant lasting world peace.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

10) Intense social pressure would not stop me from doing the right thing.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

11) I would refuse the order of a commanding officer if it meant hurting someone needlessly.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

12) I could do without the absolute necessities of life if there were others in greater need.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

13) I would confront a parent abusing his or her child in public.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

14) I would walk across a dangerously high bridge to continue on an important journey.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

15) I would endure physical pain for my religious or moral beliefs.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

16) I would go where I wanted to go and do what I wanted to do, even though I might be bullied as an ethnic minority.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

17) I will open myself to professional criticism by publishing my work.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

18) I could move to a foreign country to have the perfect job.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

19) I could keep my wits about me if I were lost in the woods at night.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

20) I would undergo physical pain and torture rather than tell political secrets.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear

21) I could work under the stress of an emergency room if needed.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Next, circle the number to indicate the level of fear you would feel in that situation

1 = Little Fear, 2 = Mild Fear, 3 = Moderate Fear, 4 = Strong Fear, 5 = Very High Fear