Research Review

Leadership and Courage

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

Institute of Leadership and Organisation Development (ILOD) promotes and supports the development of leadership and organisational development capabilities in the public service, so as to build a pool of leaders, managers and practitioners to lead, support and sustain change and transformation in their organisations. We do so by providing research, assessments and diagnostics; learning and development programmes; and consultancy and advisory services to public agencies with the aim of developing effective leaders, engaged employees, high performing teams and excellent organisations.

ABSTRACT

Singapore public service leaders are expected to lead with courage, but in a context that may discourage courage, not all leaders are observed to do so. Thus, more needs to be done to build courage. This paper examines the meaning of courage, how it applies to a leadership context, the impact of courage, and what can be done at the individual level and at the organisational level to develop courage.

In summary, the research literature describes courage as a voluntary, intentional action undertaken for a worthy goal when external circumstances are perceived to pose a threat or entail personal risks. Courage is required in everyday acts in the workplace and is particularly important in leaders as they have to deal with difficult issues and to innovate, exercise their voice and act on their convictions despite social/organisational conflicts and pressures, and to develop and be resilient in the face of challenges and adversity. A leader is more likely to display courage when there is a compelling reason for him to do so, when he believes he is capable of implementing the proposed course of action and his action will bring about the desired outcome, and when he believes he is or should be a courageous person. External factors such as the salient social norms and the organisational culture, as well as the situational or task context, also influence the display of courage. Courage leads to a virtuous cycle with positive impact on the individual, on other people who witnessed the act of courage, and on the organisation. On the other hand, a lack of courage could lead to a vicious cycle. Leaders can develop courage by clarifying their values and identity, undergoing training/practice or experiences that build their competence and self-confidence, encouraging themselves, and learning from and through others. At the organisational level, efforts can be made to provide compelling reasons for leaders to be courageous, and to develop social norms and an organisational culture that support and prime courage.
What is Courage

Courage is a concept with a long history. It has been studied since ancient times by both Western philosophers, such as Aristotle, and Eastern philosophers, such as Confucius. There is no easy way to define courage, and part of the difficulty lies in its subjectivity — different people have different perspectives and values, which affect what they consider to be courage. Furthermore, it is difficult to study courage because it is not a tangible reality but can only be inferred from observable actions.

There are many different conceptualisations of courage. It has been variously studied as a personality trait, an attitude or mindset, a single behavioural act, an accolade (a label attributed by observers to someone), a process (where the emphasis is on a person’s subjective experience), or any combination of these.

Despite the diversity in the definitions that have been offered for “courage”, there are some common elements. These are:

- a voluntary, intentional action
- external circumstances that are perceived to pose a threat or entail personal risks
- an important, usually worthy, goal or outcome

Fear is not widely regarded as a key component; the role of fear is complex — while it may be true that most situations requiring courage involve a sense of fear, the perceived threats and personal risks may produce varying degrees of fear in different situations and in different people.

Courage is usually classified based on the type of threat(s) faced: (i) physical (risking death or physical harm for the sake of a noble or socially valued goal, (ii) moral (risking disapproval, opposition or condemnation to stand up for what is right or ethical, (iii) psychological (battling personal doubts, inner fears and struggles for personal growth). However, some studies suggest that people classify courage based on the contexts and meaningful roles in one’s life rather than solely on the type of threat. Specifically, courage is categorised as (i) work/employment courage, (ii) patriotic, religion, or belief-based physical courage, (iii) social-moral courage, (iv) independent, or alternatively, family-based courage.
Courage is Important to Leadership

Courage in a work context is often associated with specific jobs requiring physical courage in life-and-death situations (e.g., firefighting) or moral courage in ethical situations (e.g., nursing). More recently, there is greater recognition that courage is required more generally in the workplace, even in office-based jobs. In these jobs, courage is required in everyday acts such as exercising employee voice, standing up for one’s convictions, taking on leadership responsibilities when one is not in a formal leadership position, and highlighting problems or wrongdoings in the organisation.

Courage is similarly needed at higher hierarchical levels, and there is some recent focus on managerial courage, which is defined as: “the willingness to do what is right in the face of ... a real or perceived danger to oneself or one’s reputation or career” (Van Eynde, 1998). Voyer (2011) goes so far as to claim that “courage is an essential and necessary ingredient for effective leadership. Contexts and times can change, but the main characteristics of leadership (of which courage is central) endure... It is hard to argue that other traits such as integrity, honesty, altruism, communications skill and decisiveness are not qualities of a good leader. But leaders could not display these traits if they didn't have courage.” Some note that there is a very fine line between managerial and moral courage or psychological courage, as many instances of managerial courage deal with moral or psychological issues.

Leaders’ Acts of Courage

Leaders need courage in a variety of situations. Some key ones are discussed below.

Leaders need courage to deal with difficult issues and to innovate

Leaders have to make many decisions each day, and these decisions often involve difficult and risky situations, such as when there are high stakes and heavy odds, when the challenges are uncertain and volatile, when there are competing demands, when the problems are complex and have no clear and easy solution (i.e., wicked problems), when there is ambiguous or incomplete information, when the short-term outcomes are at odds with the long-term outcomes, when they have to challenge conventional wisdom or the status quo, or when problems are resistant to traditional solutions. It is easy to be paralysed in such situations and avoid making decisions. Courageous leaders initiate and carry through their decisions. Some even seize the opportunity to innovate, transform their organisations, or pursue new enterprises in order to be more effective. At times, courage could entail being willing to admit
Leaders need courage to exercise their voice and act on their convictions despite social/organisational conflicts and pressures

Peer pressure, power struggles, social norms, and expectations from the organisation or those in authority often add complexity to the decision making process. Indeed, a study on courage in the workplace by Koerner (2014) found that more than half of the incidents mentioned are about overcoming social opposition: the individual takes the initiative to confront powerful others in the organisation in order to remedy a problematic situation.

Leaders may perceive that unpopular views or decisions could have dire social consequences such as social ostracism, loss of status and peer allegiance, and strained relationships. When views or decisions are unpopular with bosses, there may be economic consequences such as threats to job security and career progression, loss of job, retaliation by former employers (e.g., making it hard to find another job in the industry). As the workplace is often a place where people meet their social needs and a job typically provides both income and a sense of identity, courage is needed for leaders to express views and make decisions that are aligned with their personal convictions.

Leaders may show courage through taking action and/or using their voice for the greater good. Considering the stewardship role that leaders play, what is for the greater good could be what is best for the organisation in the long term, the employees, and/or the larger community as a whole — taking into account not only economic rationalisation but also ethical reasoning. They typically demonstrate courage by (i) resisting conformity that is not constructive, (ii) taking responsibility regardless of role or expectations, or (iii) challenging authority because of disagreements on matters of principle. For example, they may stand up for what they feel is right for the organisation regardless of the majority view of their peers, confront the status quo, embrace change in the face of resistance, take responsibility for an error, take responsibility for an important collective issue over which they have no formal authority, or speak up against their boss or senior management in situations that are incongruent with their personal values and beliefs.

Managing social conflicts is particularly relevant to middle managers because, caught in between the upper management and their subordinates, they need to find ways to link the vision of the upper management with the oftentimes conflicting realities of their peers and subordinates.
Leaders need courage to develop and be resilient

Courage is at the heart of personal development. Leaders grow when they confront their personal limitations and take the risk to change old beliefs or habits and develop new competencies that will help them be more effective, especially as they take on greater leadership responsibilities and more challenging assignments. These transitions call for courage as leaders have to face their inner fears, reconsider their identity, move out of their comfort zone, and experiment with new and unfamiliar skills rather than rely on tried and tested approaches. This is risky because failure could lead to self-doubt, guilt, embarrassment or loss of professional reputation. In addition, when mistakes are made, leaders need courage to acknowledge their mistakes (especially when the mistakes are public and the consequences are severe) and to learn from these mistakes.

Leaders also need courage to remain resilient in the face of adversity. Adversity may take the form of crises or unexpected problems that call for an urgent response from the leader, significant hardship that is beyond the control of the leader, or harsh feedback and public criticism. In such adverse situations, leaders need courage to endure the situation, keep their negative emotional responses under control, and persevere as they carry out their work.

Factors that Influence the Display of Courage

Some leaders may know what is the right decision to make or the right course of action to take, but not do it because of the risks involved. Yet, other leaders have the courage to choose to do the right thing despite these risks. Different theoretical models have been proposed to explain this process of courage. What is clear is that a mix of external circumstances and personal factors affect the display of courage.

Personal factors

People are more likely to act courageously when...

(i) there is a compelling reason for them to do so

They may believe the goal of the decision/action is important and meaningful, or the action will have a great positive or non-negative impact on others. This is influenced by one’s values and convictions, moral beliefs, empathy for others. Leaders who value serving others and stewarding the organisation are more likely to act courageously for the good of others or the organisation. Individuals with a strong sense of calling to
their job (whether the calling is inspired by religion, a sense of duty to the community or a personal mission) are more likely to take personal risks to preserve high moral standards. People who find meaning in their work or in humanity could also be more likely to act courageously to make social-moral decisions in job-related situations.

(ii) they believe they are capable of implementing the proposed course of action, and their action will bring about the desired outcome

This is influenced by one’s confidence or self-efficacy, one’s actual level of expertise, whether one possesses the skills and scripts to voice and act upon one’s values. Experiences of success when acting courageously could encourage further courage, as could simply witnessing others acting courageously. On the other hand, people are deterred from acting courageously if they perceive that nothing will be changed by their action, and this perception may be influenced by their own prior experience or the experience of the people around them.

This is also influenced by the organisational and social support. Organisations with supportive structures that provide employees with a sense of safety and sense of shared accountability in addressing the issue, are more likely to encourage courageous behaviour.

(iii) they believe they are a courageous person or should be courageous

People who identify themselves as courageous and who perceive they have a role in stewarding the well-being of the organisation and other people are more likely to act in a courageous way for the greater good, so that their actions will be congruous with their identity.

External factors

People are more likely to act courageously when...

(i) this is consistent with salient social norms and the organisational culture

Organisations create their own moral universe with their own standards of right and wrong, and systemic pressure from others in in the same universe can influence one’s personal conduct and standards. If courageous behaviour is the norm in the organisation, individuals could be encouraged to act courageously. On the other hand, organisations that are highly competitive may cause employees to experience great pressure to do whatever they can to succeed, resulting in a focus on selfishness and individual goals rather than the common good. Some organisations may prioritise conformity and social harmony, which deters individuals from acting courageously to
go against the established norms or consensus. Nonetheless, those who have a lower regard for conformity and obedience to authority, or a greater sense of independence at work, may be less affected by the salient norms and culture.

(ii) this is primed by the situational or task context

Exposure to certain situations, such as those that support courage, may trigger courage. Courage may also be triggered by the task or context. For instance, an individual may have the courage to act in line with one’s values and against the group norms but not to act against authorities.

Impact of Courage

Courage is contagious and leads to a virtuous cycle.

Positive impact on the individual

Acting courageously builds one’s authenticity because one is acting in accordance with one’s values and commitments, and this opens the possibility of becoming who one is and develops meaning in one’s life. Indeed, some people describe their courageous acts as defining moments that have shaped their identity — in terms of preserving, strengthening, repairing, asserting, or revising it, or even creating a new identity. People who have acted courageously frequently report positive feelings such as joy, pride and relief, because they have managed to resolve tensions that occurred when their values or self and social identity came under threat.

It is not surprising then that acting courageously also strengthens one’s sense of confidence, builds a sense of accomplishment, and builds a sense of individual agency (the capacity to make one’s own free choice and act independently), all of which encourage further courage.

In addition, people who act courageously are often viewed with admiration and respect. They are also more likely to be viewed as effective performers who are capable of producing long-term sustained success for the individual and organisation as a whole, and they receive recognition and career advancement.

It has also been argued that acting ethically is its own reward. Empirical findings showed that managerial courage was always viewed positively regardless of the outcome of the action.
Even individuals who suffered damaged relationships, career derailment or job loss felt good about their actions because they were being true to themselves.

**Positive impact on other people**

An act of courage can inspire followers, peers, or other witnesses to display courage because of the positive role model. Even if they witnessed a courageous act that did not have a successful outcome, these observers have a broader sense of what is possible in the organisation and feel more capable of taking similar courageous actions in future.

**Positive impact on the organisation**

An act of courage may trigger organisational changes, lead to more effective and moral decisions, more organisational innovation, improved organisational performance, more positive culture and norms, better reputation, and greater employee creativity. Leaders who have the courage to facilitate their employees’ change-oriented suggestions shape the climate for employees to speak up. Leaders at the middle management level are especially key because they often need to promote their employees’ ideas towards their own boss, even when their own boss may be more interested in maintaining the status quo.

**Lack of courage could lead to a vicious cycle**

On the other hand, when leaders show a lack of courage, there is a negative impact on themselves. They feel ashamed, remorseful, regretful or frustrated, and may be less likely to act courageously in the future. There is also a negative impact on other people, and the broader organisation. People who witness a lack of courage feel resentment and frustration, and may similarly hesitate from acting courageously. When a leader fails to stand up to unethical behaviours, their lack of courage could foster a negative climate and further wrongdoings in the organisation.

**Developing Courage in Leaders**

Empirical studies on physical courage, moral courage, and psychological courage have shown that it is possible to build courage. Courage may be developed incidentally, when an individual learns from his experiences of courage or imitates others who have displayed courage. It is also possible to develop courage systematically through a structured approach, by focusing on the factors that influence the display of courage. In other words, the interventions should be centred around helping people (i) discover compelling reasons to be courageous, (ii) be
capable of acting courageously, and perceive that they are capable of doing so, (iii) develop an identity of being a courageous person.

**Clarify values and identity**

People who act courageously have a clear moral compass. Thus, a first step to developing courage is to help leaders clarify what their personal values and mission are, and how their work is aligned to these. In addition, they need to be aware of how they have defined their personal identity, as well as their identity in their various social/organisational roles of leader, peer, subordinate, member of the organisation and broader community. These efforts can help them to discover the reasons and circumstances that will compel them to act courageously.

**Training and practice**

Training and practice builds competence (knowledge and skills) and self-confidence, which makes it more likely for an individual to act courageously because he perceives that he has the competence to carry out the desired action, and is indeed capable of bringing about the desired outcome. Training and practice may involve building personal governance skills that boost courage. These include learning how to use emotions as a cue to pay attention to feelings about issues that require a courageous stance; how to take a reflective pause from decision-making to collect their thoughts, generate options, gather additional information and support, and so build momentum towards courageous action; and how to self-regulate one’s behaviours and reactions in order to manage tough decisions.

Training and practice can take the form of mastery experiences that are purposively created, with guidance and feedback; repeated practice; role plays and discussions. Training may also take the form of cognitive modelling, where the individual mentally rehearses being in likely scenarios that require courage, and practising how to act appropriately, possibly using pre-scripted responses.

**Self-encouragement**

Encouragement from others can spur one to display courage. Similarly, self-encouragement can spur courage when one focuses on the desired goal and think about its nobility and meaningfulness, and avoids negative thoughts. Leaders can also be taught to assess the actual, rather than the perceived, risks of a situation, so that they are not deterred from acting courageously by an exaggerated sense of the risks involved.
Learn from/through others

Leaders can learn vicariously through the experiences of relevant role models. These role models could also influence leaders with their personal values and how they perceive group norms. Leaders could also be assigned mentors, who can help them to build courage by teaching and training them, suggesting where and how to show courage, encouraging risk taking, clarifying performance and role/identity expectations, highlighting professional values, providing support and affirmation, and delivering feedback.

Developing an Organisational Environment that encourage Courage

At the organisational level, efforts to influence the display of courage should be centred around (i) providing compelling reasons for employees to be courageous, (ii) developing social norms and an organisational culture that supports courage, (iii) developing a context that primes courageous behaviours.

Provide compelling reasons for leaders to be courageous

Commitment to the organisation or profession drives courageous behaviours that are in the best interests of the organisational mission or profession. To build loyalty to the vision and mission of the organisation, the organisation must first ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of the organisational mission, vision and values. Importantly, what is espoused needs to be consistent with what is experienced daily by the employees. For leaders, a clear understanding of the leadership philosophy and values of the organisation may help to highlight the importance of leadership courage and encourage adherence to these values.

Commitment to the organisation may also be built by delegating appropriate authority to employees (and providing them with adequate resources and support) so that they feel more empowered. Collaborative decision-making additionally helps employees to have a greater sense of personal ownership over issues and concerns, which would encourage them to act with courage when necessary.

Develop social norms and an organisational culture that support and prime courageous behaviours

When people act courageously, it is often because the benefits of doing the right thing outweigh the costs of not doing so, even when the risks are taken into account. There is much that an organisation could do to develop a supportive social and organisational environment that boosts the benefits and reduces the costs associated with acting courageously.
A culture of openness and constructive dissent encourages courageous behaviours. Management needs to continuously solicit fresh ideas and challenge the status quo, and be seen to welcome alternative solutions and divergent opinions. Employees are more likely to act courageously, such as speaking up to raise concerns, when there is a sense of psychological safety which makes them feel that the risks or potential negative outcomes associated with speaking up are negligible.

Courage can also be encouraged when an organisation provides praise or other rewards and recognition systems for courageous actions, and do not reward people for decisions and performance that lack moral strength. Importantly, when employees display courage to raise their suggestions, concerns and opinions, their supervisors must be seen to respond adequately to these input, as this will build employees’ sense of efficacy and encourage them to speak up in future. Otherwise, people’s sense of the possibility for change in the organisation will be narrowed.

At the same time, the organisation could make courage more salient to all in the organisation by providing narratives about courageous role models, encouraging sharing of personal experiences of situations that require courage, and encouraging dialogues about what constitutes courage. Such initiatives could help the organisation establish norms for what behaviours are considered courageous in the organisational context, and also prime courageous behaviour in the organisation. The sharing circles could further be a means for peers to provide and receive personal and professional support to/from one another as they develop courage.

**Implications for the Singapore Public Service**

**The importance of courage in the Singapore public service**

Courage is arguably even more important in Singapore public service leaders, whose role is to serve the nation and improve people’s lives by being good stewards of Singapore’s resources, holding responsibility for the future yet careful to build on the past, and enabling the achievement of quality outcome. Singapore public service leaders are also operating in a context where the public is increasingly demanding, vocal and critical. According to a periodic service-wide survey conducted by the Civil Service College in 2015, more than 90 per cent of the respondents believe that leaders should lead with courage to rise above difficult circumstances, to do the right thing in the right way. Yet, only 52.2 per cent of respondents indicated that they observed courage in up to half of the leaders that they come in contact with. This suggests more needs to be done to build courage in the Singapore public service.
At the individual level

Individual leaders need to recognise that many everyday actions require courage, and that their daily actions and decisions matter, as there are consequences for themselves, for the people around them, for the organisation, and for the people served by the organisation. Leaders also need to recognise that their actions and the organisational systems that they create can encourage or inhibit courage in the people around them. Leaders play the dual role of being courageous individuals as well as facilitators of courageous behaviours by their followers and peers.

At the organisational level

The context of the Singapore public service may discourage courage. Davidson (2016) pointed out that the Singapore public service has been repeatedly described by public service officers themselves as a high-stakes, competitive, and tight environment with limited promotion opportunities. This means there is limited room for mistakes, and managers tend to conduct themselves in what is considered the appropriate way. Moreover, the power distance is strong in the Singaporean cultural context, and the views of those higher-up in the hierarchy tend to be accepted by those lower down in the hierarchy. This may discourage leaders from behaving courageously if their action is perceived to go against the established norms, or to go against those in higher authority. Thus, more effort must be made to build an organisational culture that supports courage.

Furthermore, policy work often deals with complex issues that have social, economic/financial and political dimensions. There is typically no clear right or wrong answer, and public service officers report a lot of uncertainty as to what the leadership values and supports, and which trade-offs are acceptable. Thus, there needs to be an open discussion on what is valued by the organisation, so there can be a common understanding of policy intentions and objectives, as well as the larger context within which a courageous response will have the greatest impact.

Conclusion

The studies on courage have tended to be theoretical, and even in empirical studies, the select sampling means that the findings many not generalise to all managerial situations. Cultural differences in the perceptions of the dimensions of courage, and in the interaction between personal and situational factors, may similarly mean that not all the findings can be applied to the Singapore public service. Nonetheless, the data thus far indicates the importance of
courage in leadership, and possibilities for building courage in leaders as well as in the organisation at large.
References


