

# **Courage at Work: Understanding the Processes and Factors that Facilitate Courageous Work**

## **Abstract**

The term courage is derived from the french term “*coeur*” or “*heart*” and therefore courage in organizations implies the centre or core of the organization from which organizational life and processes flow (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1998). The study of courage is rooted in philosophy where it has been defined as a virtue, which is manifested in response to threatening or difficult conditions and is associated with largely positive outcomes. There is a growing interest in the study of courage in organizational research, as it provides a compelling framework to examine the interplay of organizational systems and processes, individuals and situations (Harbour & Kisfalvi, 2014). Courage has been operationalized as a quality of managerial decision making, visionary leadership or an attempt to correct an organizational wrongdoing. Courageous actions can be regarded as an immune system of the organization which keeps organizational health in check (Schilpzand et al., 2014). Despite the ubiquity and the necessity of the concept, courage scholarship suffers from unsystematic theorization and a resulting scanty empirical research.

Extant studies on courage in organizational literature adopt a deterministic and agent-centric approach, highlighting isolated acts of courage such as acts of whistle-blowing, voice behaviour, and so on (Quinn & Worline, 2008; Sekerka et al., 2009; Vadera et al., 2013). Further, research has primarily focused on exceptional behaviour shown by individuals in various circumstances, as compared to courage displayed by individuals that may require engagement with risks, threats and obstacles on an everyday basis in organizational contexts (Beyer & Nino, 1998). In addition, scholars have lamented on the absence of process-based

studies of courage examining the social context within which courageous behaviour is enacted.

Courage is regarded as a polysemic concept in management studies, and has several but related connotations (Detert & Bruno, 2017; Harbour & Kisfalvi, 2012; Klepousniotou et al., 2008). Such concepts have different meanings in different contexts for different people. Thus courage in the case of top management could be illustrated by the boldness of the decision, a soldier is courageous because he/she is risking his/her life for the nation, or women in a small village are courageous because they are resisting the everyday patriarchy of their society. Therefore the very nature of the concept is fluid and people ascribe idiosyncratic meaning to it in a given context. This quality of the concept not only makes it difficult to investigate the phenomenon, it has given rise to various courage related definitions and conceptions, and contradictory findings on a variety of issues such as whistle blowing, positive deviance, speaking up and taking charge. This has hampered empirical work on the construct and also poses a big challenge towards building a coherent courage scholarship. However, some scholars have proposed that there is a core element that links the various meanings attributed to the given polysemic concept.

Given the inherent subjectivity in the experience and perception of courage, the construct has been defined as a moral decision, a personality trait or a quality of behaviour. Despite the unorganized nature of courage scholarship, scholars have come to agree that courageous actions have two core components in any given context: facing 'difficulty/danger', for a 'worthy cause', where the nature of threat and meaningfulness of the cause are highlighted in any given context.

In order to understand the underlying factors and processes of courageous work, the dissertation is taking a behavioural approach to the investigation of courage. Recent researches contend that no single individual or action can influence the organization without

the participation of others. Therefore rather than conceptualizing courage as a trait contained within an individual that makes him/her fearless present work is interested in capturing the fluid relational process of courage (McNamee, 1998; Koerner 2014, Shilpzand et al., 2014). The widely accepted definition of courage proposed by Goud (2005) serves as the framework for the dissertation. He defines it as '*acting intentionally in the face of risks, threat and obstacles in the pursuit of morally worthy goals*'. Unlike the earlier work on courage in management, such as managerial decision making, or professional moral courage, the dissertation does not limit itself to examine only the 'implicit theories' of an actor's courage experience but the objective here is to understand the unfolding process of courage in undertaking roles that involve taking risks or facing challenges, for a worthy purpose, in a given context.

The fragmented nature of courage literature, lack of consensus on the definition and scanty empirical studies suggest that an inductive approach is appropriate to examine the polysemic construct of courage. In the dissertation, I have followed the constructivist grounded theory method to study courage in two research contexts – the courage of wild life rescue officers and courage shown by members of a women self-help group (SHG). Goud's (2005) definition has guided the context identification and exploration of courageous work for the two studies under investigation.

The first study is situated in the context of the wider issue of human-animal conflicts. The cases of human and wild life confrontations are rising around the world, and experts say that climate change effects will make it worse. According to the Union Environment Ministry, more than 1,608 humans were killed in conflict cases involving tigers, leopards, bears and elephants between 2013 and 2017, in India. With expanding communities and shrinking wild life territories, both factions are increasingly pitted against each other for food and space. The consequences of the conflict are often huge in terms of loss of livestock,

property, and at times human lives. The animals caught in the crossfire are often injured and sometimes killed in retaliation, and the whole process increases the hostility towards wild animals, in the minds of the community. The wild life rescue officers are entrusted with the responsibility of safe rescue and translocation of wild animals and also of protecting the interests of the human population affected by the encroachment of the animal. The rescue narratives of the officers reveal interesting insights about the process of courageous work, by bringing out the multifaceted nature of threats that they have to confront, and how they negotiate with them. The rescue operations make an interesting case for the exploration of courage as the actors face a complex mix of challenges and threats, which are too large to handle individually, and thus the setting reveals the courage dynamics inherent in organizing in a situation of crisis.

The second study investigates the courage of members of a women's self-help group (SHG) working towards the empowerment of women in a patriarchal society. As per the Global Gender Gap Index (2018) published by the World Economic Forum, India ranks 108<sup>th</sup> out of 149 countries on gender parity. The index is calculated on four sub-dimensions - economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The index stands for the inequality and discrimination women face in their everyday lives. The state of affairs is starker in the Indian rural areas with dismal opportunity and support for education, healthcare, economic and political participation, for women. Women self-help groups have been seen as an important instrument for women's empowerment. I studied the journey of members of a women federation in a set of tribal villages to understand how they overcame the threats associated with their fight against the entrenched patriarchy that they were embedded in.

The findings of the studies reveal the underlying processes of courage manifestations. The present analysis extends current understanding and explanations of the process of

courage that suggest that courage goes beyond the individual's disposition to take risks. Study 1 (Rescue operations) highlights the role of various narratives and their interactions, as the precondition for courage enactment. My analysis emphasizes the under-examined role of space and collaboration narratives in explaining courageous work. The case of SHG women discussed in Study 2 brings out the role of identity work in courage. The present study reveals the various stages and processes of identity work these women go through in their SHG journey. The courage-based identity work reflected in their SHG participation, reveals how the women's sense of self transforms in their efforts to change the existing social norms and practices, and how both feed into each other. The analysis emphasizes the role of internal and external identity work and their on-going interaction in the enactment of courage.

The two research contexts present unique sites for the examination of courageous work, and the analysis reveals interesting insights about underlying courage dynamics. The rich data and grounded theory analysis followed in the dissertation help us in taking a closer look into the phenomenon of courage as it unfolds in vivo. Through the study I hope to contribute to the theorization of courage. The study also has practical implications for managers and for training in dealing with challenging and threatening situations.

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